

*Veldt to scrub to fields to farms to these first tumbling houses that rise from the earth. It has been night for a long time. The hovels that encrust the river's edge have grown like mushrooms around me in the dark.*

*We rock. We pitch in a deep current.*

*Behind me the man tugs uneasily at his rudder and the barge corrects. Light lurches as the lantern swings. The man is afraid of me. I lean out from the prow of the small vessel across the darkly moving water.*

*Over the engines oily rumble and the caresses of the river small sounds, house sounds, are building. Timbers whisper and the wind strokes thatch, walls settle and floors shift to fill space; the tens of houses have become hundreds, thousands; they spread backwards from the banks and shed light from all across the plain.*

*They surround me. They are growing. They are taller and fatter and noisier, their roofs are slate, their walls are strong brick.*

*The river twists and turns to face the city. It looms suddenly, massive, stamped on the landscape. Its light wells up around the surrounds, the rock hills, like bruise-blood. Its dirty towers glow. I am debased. I am compelled to worship this extraordinary presence that has silted into existence at the conjunction of two rivers. It is a vast pollutant, a stench, a klaxon sounding. Fat chimneys retch dirt into the sky even now in the deep night. It is not the current which pulls us but the city itself, its weight sucks us in. Faint shouts, here and there the calls of beasts, the obscene clash and pounding from the factories as huge machines rut. Railways trace urban anatomy like protruding veins. Red brick and dark walls, squat churches like troglodytic things, ragged awnings flickering, cobbled mazes in the old town, culs-de-sac, sewers riddling the earth like secular sepulchres, a new landscape of wasteground, crushed stone, libraries fat with forgotten volumes, old hospitals, towerblocks, ships and metal claws that lift cargoes from the water.*

*How could we not see this approaching? What trick of topography is this, that lets the sprawling monster hide behind corners to leap out at the traveller?*

*It is too late to flee.*

*The man murmurs to me, tells me where we are. I do not turn to him.*

*This is Raven's Gate, this brutalized warren around us. The rotting buildings lean against each other, exhausted. The river smears slime on its brick banks, city walls risen from the depths to hold the water at bay. There is a vile stink here.*

*(I wonder how this looks from above, no chance for the city to hide then, if you came at it on the wind you would see it from miles and miles away like a dirty smear, like a slab of carrion thronging with maggots, I should not think like this but I cannot stop now, I could ride the updrafts that the chimneys vent, sail high over the proud towers and shit on the earthbound, ride the chaos, alight where I choose, I must not think like this, I must not do this now, I must stop, not now, not this, not yet.)*

*Here there are houses which dribble pale mucus, an organic daubing that smears base facades and oozes from top windows. Extra storeys are rendered in the cold white muck which fills gaps between houses and dead-end alleys. The landscape is defaced with ripples as if wax has melted and set suddenly across the rooftops. Some other intelligence has made these human streets their own.*